



Early Journal Content on JSTOR, Free to Anyone in the World

This article is one of nearly 500,000 scholarly works digitized and made freely available to everyone in the world by JSTOR.

Known as the Early Journal Content, this set of works include research articles, news, letters, and other writings published in more than 200 of the oldest leading academic journals. The works date from the mid-seventeenth to the early twentieth centuries.

We encourage people to read and share the Early Journal Content openly and to tell others that this resource exists. People may post this content online or redistribute in any way for non-commercial purposes.

Read more about Early Journal Content at <http://about.jstor.org/participate-jstor/individuals/early-journal-content>.

JSTOR is a digital library of academic journals, books, and primary source objects. JSTOR helps people discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content through a powerful research and teaching platform, and preserves this content for future generations. JSTOR is part of ITHAKA, a not-for-profit organization that also includes Ithaka S+R and Portico. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

A NOTE ON WALT WHITMAN'S PROSODY.

TWO leading ideas may be said to prevail among students of literature in regard to the prosody of Walt Whitman. According to one he is a bungler, he has no sense for artistic literary form; according to the other he is a successful innovator, at once the herald and exemplar of a prosodic revolution.

A typical example of the first, or hostile view may be found in Professor Barrett Wendell's *History of Literature in America*. There we may learn that the spirit of Whitman's work "is that of old-world anarchy; its form has all the perverse oddity of world-old abortive decadence." His poetry is "uncouth, inarticulate, and lacks in a grotesque degree artistic form." Speaking of the "Song of Myself" and "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry," Professor Wendell says that the lines are "so recklessly misshapen that you cannot tell whether their author was able to write with amenity." Elsewhere he characterizes the latter poem as "confused, inarticulate, and surging in a mad kind of rhythm which sounds as if hexameters were trying to bubble through sewage."

A similar view is expressed by Edmund Gosse, when he applies to the poems the phrase "without composition, evolution, or vertebration of style," by Professor Trent, when he speaks of the poet's "inborn want of art," by Mr. Stedman when he refers to Whitman's "somewhat wandering sense of form," and by Mr. Liddell when he says of a passage in "Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking" that "its ragged incompleteness, its hopeless lack of definition, its confusing twists and turns and vagaries would interfere with any, even the vaguest perception, of aesthetic arrangement."

A variant of this theory is that although he had some artistic skill, and could use it, now and then, rather effectively, he nevertheless took a wicked delight in not using it. He could write in fairly regular iambs if he chose, as witness, "Captain!

My Captain!" and "Ethiopia Saluting the Colors;" but in the main he did not choose. He preferred to be wayward, irregular, and amorphous.

If we accept the second theory we must go to the other extreme. We must hold that instead of falling below the standards of traditional art, Whitman rose above them, dispensed with them, and actually discredited them. More precisely, he threw aside the conventional forms of verse just in order that he might the better display that spirit of absolute unconstraint to which he had dedicated himself. Of this view Mr. John Burrough's elaborate study of Whitman, published in 1896, is perhaps the best exponent. If we may believe Mr. Burroughs, Whitman's poems are the "negation of extrinsic art." They are "the direct outgrowth of the personality of the poet; they are born directly upon the ego as it were, like the fruit of that tropical tree which grows immediately upon the trunk." They are not so much poems as nature itself. "The shorter poems are like bunches of herbs or leaves, or a handful of sprays gathered in a walk." The music of his verse is as the music of the winds and waves. It is to be tested by open-air standards, by comparison with clouds, trees, rivers, spaces, not by comparison with works of art so called. There is no composition in such a poem as the "Song of Myself," no artistic whole, no logical sequence, but just "tufts and tussocks of grass." "His thought and meaning are enveloped in his crowded, concrete and turbulent pages, as science is enveloped in nature."

In fine Whitman, according to Mr. Burroughs, is an *Ueberdichter*, whose lines we may admire and enjoy but must not presume to scan.

Such are the two theories between which we are asked to choose. For my part I cannot bring myself to accept either of them. That Whitman was no artist, or that he wantonly spoiled his *metier*, seems to me unlikely; on the other hand, that he was above art, I deem impossible, for reasons which I will give presently. In the place of these explanations I mean to bring forward a third, which seems to me both more rational and

closer to the facts as I have read them. Before doing so, however, I will consider briefly the two theories which have just been indicated, and give my reasons for rejecting them.

Since they come to the same thing in the end, both resting upon the assumption that Whitman wanted art, I shall not attempt in what follows always to separate them, though first I shall pay my respects to the *Ueberdichter* theory.

The view for which Mr. Burroughs is sponsor involves considerations concerning the relations of art and nature. According to this view, if I understand it, art tends not only to approximate to nature, but to merge in it and become identical with it. Nature is the goal of art, not to say its grave. Eluding the restraints of form, art, in its highest manifestations, attains to the unbounded freedom of nature. It negates itself and passes into a kind of naturistic nirvana. At any rate it so merges itself with nature that one is no longer distinguishable from the other.

With one kind of merger of nature and art everyone is familiar. Nature in its passage through the artist's mind is said to disappear as nature in order to reappear as art. Thus we speak of art as "second nature," meaning that nature's raw material is by the artist absorbed, assimilated and shaped to artistic ends. But the theory under discussion reverses the process. The assimilation works backwards. Art disappears as art to reappear as crude, unbounded nature. Art is best in undress. The poet is most a poet when, casting aside all restraint, breaking with all artistic law, he ramps undraped in the wide unplumbed welter of things.

With an orgiastic aesthetic such as this, I for one must part company, although it is not difficult for me to understand it, nor to see why it is attractive to Mr Burroughs. It is false, I think, in two particulars,—first, in that it tends to merge into one two things which can be understood only by keeping them apart, and second, that in so far as it does keep them apart, it turns upside down their true relationship. The two things are of course art and nature.

"If we had real life," said Wagner, "we should need no art." Few doctrines are more fallacious. Goethe was right: Art is art because it is not nature. Close as is the relation between them—closer than breathing, nearer than hands and feet—the boundary line can never be safely crossed. "Thou necessary film, continue to envelope the soul," says Whitman in one passage, and he expresses therein a great aesthetic truth. The film must not be broken through. Art can never become free, in the sense that it becomes interminable or unlimited or chaotic, without ceasing to be art; and nature can never lose its fortuitousness and "splendid extravagance" without becoming in a sense artistic.

The relation between art and nature is like that between a people and its government. The two are one, yet never one. In a sense the people are the government, that is, the nearer the government is to the people, and the more responsive it is to the healthy will and temper of the people, the better. But the two are after all distinct. The instant you let the government go and fall back upon the people as the only political reality, that instant you pass from democracy to anarchy. You have then neither a good government nor a free people. The people can become free and remain free, only by submission to restraint. They can preserve their coherence, their communal individuality, their organic life and opportunity for unlimited expansion of that life, only as these things incessantly find expression in traditional, law-observing, law-embodiment institutions.

Applying the analogy to the relations of art and nature, we may say that the artist never ought to be free to express himself, as nature does, in "tufts and tussocks of grass." He indeed achieves a freedom—all the freedom he needs, all the freedom there is for him—but he invariably achieves it by submitting himself to the restraints of artistic law. He may break with the law of art if he likes, but if he does, the less artist he, and indeed the greater slave, for he has thrown away the only instrument by which he can attain his freedom. "Das Gesetz nur kann uns Freiheit geben."

I have said that in the second place Burroughs reversed the due relation of nature and art. He would make the test of art its resemblance to nature, finding the standard in nature rather than in art. This is the traditional view, and it requires some courage to oppose it. Nevertheless I will venture the opinion that the standard of art is to be found in art itself, that is, in the conditions of human intercourse. If art holds the mirror up to nature, the secret of their relationship is to be sought in the *way* in which the mirror is held up, not in the nature that is mirrored.

The subject is a large one, too large to be debated here. I therefore simply file my opinion, at the same time remarking that if it is necessary to turn our backs on art, and retreat to the wild in order to find an aesthetic foundation for our prosodic system, I am ready to give the task over. Persons who write tufts and tussocks of grass may be good agriculturists; they cannot be good poets.

But it may not be necessary either to shut the camel out or to abandon the tent if he comes in. Perhaps the animal is not so big nor so fractious as Mr. Burroughs thinks he is.

Doubtless one may find in Whitman's own utterances warrant for what I have called the orgiastic view of poetry. "I finish no specimens," he says in one of his poems, "I shower them by exhaustless laws, fresh and modern continually, as nature does."

And again,

"I myself but write one or two indicative words for the future.
I but advance a moment only to wheel and hurry back in the
darkness.

I am a man who, sauntering along without fully stopping, turns
a casual look upon you and then averts his face,
Leaving it to you to prove and define it.
Expecting the main things from you."

In the same vein is the poem written in Platte Canyon, in which, as we learn from his diary, Whitman embodied his poetic creed:

SPIRIT THAT FORM'D THIS SCENE.

Spirit that form'd this scene,
These tumbled rock-piles grim and red,
These reckless heaven-ambitious peaks,
These gorges, turbulent-clear streams, this naked freshness,
These formless wild arrays, for reasons of their own,
I know thee, savage spirit—we have communed together,
Mine too such wild arrays, for reasons of their own;
Wasn't charged against my chants they had forgotten art?
To fuse within themselves its rules precise and delicatessen?
The lyrist's measur'd beat, the wrought-out temple's grace—
column and polish'd arch forgot?
But thou that revelest here—spirit that form'd this scene,
They have remember'd thee.

Here and in other passages Whitman seems indeed to adopt unreservedly the doctrine of poetic formlessness. But, it may be asked, doth not the muse protest too much? Poets from time immemorial have had the privilege of expressing wild and rebellious thoughts about anything in the universe, their own art included; but curiously enough they have expressed these rebellious thoughts best when they have spoken in orderly and chastened language. In spite of his disclaims, there, it may be that Whitman at the very moment when he thinks he is uttering tufts and tussocks of grass, is in reality building the lofty rhyme. I believe that this is so and I think that we shall find some evidence to support this contention if we turn to Whitman's prose.

In the first place, there are passages not a few in his prose writings in which the claims of regularity, symmetry, measure, and obedience to rhythmic law are clearly recognized. I will cite one or two of them:

"The fruition of beauty is no chance of miss or hit—it is as inevitable as life—it is exact and plumb as gravitation. From the eyesight proceeds another eyesight, and from the hearing proceeds another hearing, and from the voice proceeds another voice, eternally curious of the harmony of things with man. These understand the law of perfection in masses and floods—that it is profuse and impartial—that there is not a minute of the light or dark, nor an acre of the earth and sea, without it—

nor any direction of the sky, nor any trade or employment, nor any turn of events. This is the reason that about the proper expression of beauty there is precision and balance."

In one curious and significant passage Whitman fairly makes a return upon Whitman, candidly admitting that his sense for the beauty of nature may have its roots in art itself:

"That spread of waves and gray-white beach, salt, monotonous, senseless—such an entire absence of art, books, talk, elegance—so indescribably comforting, even this winter's day—grim, yet so delicate-looking, so spiritual-striking, emotional, impalpable depths, subtler than all the poems, paintings, music, I have ever read, seen, heard. (*Yet let me be fair, perhaps it is because I have read those poems and heard that music.*)" (Specimen Days, p. 95.)

In the second place, corroborative evidence may be drawn from Whitman's method of composition. Burroughs says that Whitman "did not build anything strictly speaking. He let himself go." But this view does not square with Whitman's own words. We know that far from throwing off his poems in a mad, delirious ecstasy—with "rushing spontaneity," as Mrs. Gilchrist would have it—he labored long and hard to bring them to perfection. By the spring of 1855, says Dr. Bucke, "Whitman had found or made a style in which he could express himself, and in that style he had (after as he told me elaborately building up the structure and then utterly demolishing it five different times) written twelve poems, and a long prose preface which was simply another poem."

When he was correcting the proofs of the seventh edition of "Leaves of Grass" in 1881, he said to a reporter of the Boston Globe, "This edition will complete the design which I had in my mind when I began to write. The whole affair is like one of those old architectural edifices, some of which were hundreds of years building, and the designer of which has the whole idea in his mind from the first." What is this but the method of all great constructive artists from Aeschylus to Browning? Whether the artist's design is completed in a day or in a life time, is of

little consequence; the essential and characterizing trait is surely the ability to plan and foresee a constructive whole, and to keep it steadily before the inner eye until it is completed.

But the most convincing proofs are to be found in Whitman's own manuscripts. Through the kindness of Mr. Horace Traubel, the Boswell of Whitman and one of his literary executors, I have had the privilege of examining the notes, outlines, and preliminary studies of two of Whitman's poems, together with the many versions through which each poem passed on its way to the final copy. From these remains it is evident that the poet's "spontaneity," like that of most artists, was the result of prolonged and painful toil. The underground work which preceded the actual composition is amazing in its extent and thoroughness. In the inception of the poem hundreds of vague suggestions are noted, examined, and rejected. In course of time the "spinal idea" as Whitman terms it, emerges and is triumphantly announced. Then in page upon page of tentative outlines, all possible developments of this spinal idea are forecasted and subjected to searching criticism. When the structure of the poem has been determined with some exactitude, other pages are devoted to lists of words and phrases suitable for the expression of the prominent ideas. Finally come the successive versions of the poem, most of them so disfigured by erasures and interlineations as to be nearly or quite illegible. I venture the opinion that no fair-minded critic, after examining these evidences will deny to Whitman the name of artist. Whether one likes his art or not is another question, but that he held before himself a high and difficult ideal and strove with all the powers of his genius to attain it, is as certain as anything in literary history.

I shall assume, then, that Whitman, in throwing aside the traditional scheme of English versification, still adhered to artistic methods. If his poems are difficult of scansion, as undoubtedly they are, we need not hastily assume that they are amorphous or recklessly misshapen, nor yet that they are the negation of extrinsic art. Their seeming departures from tra-

ditional canons may have an artistic rationale. Starting with this assumption let us next imagine what poetic principles he adopted and why he adopted them. We may take as a starting point an illuminative passage from his own writings. It appears in the books entitled "Collect" under the heading:

NEW POETRY.

In my opinion the time has arrived to essentially break down the barriers of form between prose and poetry. I say the latter is henceforth to win and maintain its character regardless of rhyme, and the measurement-rules of iambic, spondee, dactyl, etc., and that even if rhyme and those measurements continue to furnish the medium for inferior writers and themes, (especially for persiflage and the comic, as there seems henceforward, to the perfect taste, something inevitably comic in rhyme, merely in itself, and anyhow,) the truest and greatest poetry, (while subtly and necessarily always rhythmic, and distinguishable easily enough,) can never again, in the English language, be expressed in arbitrary and rhyming metre, any more than the greatest eloquence, or the truest power and passion. While admitting that the venerable and heavenly forms of chiming versification have in their time play'd great and fitting parts—that the pensive complaint, the ballads, wars, amours, legends of Europe, etc., have, many of them, been inimitably rendered in rhyming verse—that there have been very illustrious poets whose shapes the mantle of such verse has beautifully and appropriately enveloped—and though the mantle has fallen, with perhaps added beauty, on some of our own age—it is, notwithstanding, certain to me, that the day of such conventional rhyme is ended.

In America, at any rate, and as a medium of highest aesthetic, practical or spiritual expression, present or future, it palpably fails, and must fail, to serve. The Muse of the Prairies, of California, Canada, Texas, and of the peaks of Colorado, dismissing the literary, as well as social etiquette of over-sea feudalism and caste, joyfully enlarging, adapting itself to comprehend the size of the whole people, with the free play, emotions, pride, passions, experiences, that belong to them, body and soul to the general globe, and all its relations in astronomy, as the savans portray them to us—to the modern, the busy nineteenth century, (as grandly poetic as any, only different,) with steamships, railroads, factories, electric telegraphs, cylinder presses—to the

thought of the solidity of nations, the brotherhood and sisterhood of the entire earth—to the dignity and heroism of the practical labor of farms, factories, foundries, workshops, mines, or on shipboard, or on lakes and rivers—resumes that other medium of expression, more flexible, more eligible—soars to the freer, vast, diviner heaven of prose.

It appears, from this passage, that Whitman, feeling his genius confined by accentual metres and seeking for a different medium of expression, turned from verse to prose. Why he did so will perhaps become clear if we consider how these two types of literature differ in their rhythmical structure.

As I have tried to show elsewhere,¹ the fundamental difference between prose and poetry if we trace each to its origin, is that in one speech was used mainly for purposes of communication, in the other mainly for purposes of expression. The earliest poetic forms were the results of man's efforts to give free vent to his emotions. Poetry was the spontaneous expression of joy, grief, religious fervor and the like, and its closest associations were with the communal dance. The earliest prose forms, on the other hand, were communicative forms. They sprang from situations in which man's most urgent need was to transmit his thoughts and feelings to his fellows. Prose was thus the outcome of conversation, signals, calls for aid, cries of warning, and, in general, of intercourse whose chief purpose was the maintaining of social organization.

Each of these branches of literature has its special type of rhythm. With the rhythm of verse everyone is familiar. It is composed of units of speech which we call syllables, arranged in rhythmic patterns called feet, which are again combined in larger rhythmic patterns called lines. Its chief characteristics are perhaps the brevity of the recurring units and the frequency with which the same rhythmic pattern is repeated.

The materials out of which the pattern of verse is woven may theoretically be any of the elements of speech. These elements are, generally speaking, stress, quantity, quality, pitch, number of units, rate of movement, and pause. But in the history of lit-

¹Publications of the Modern Language Association XIX. 2.

erature now one element now another has gained the upper hand and formed the regulative principle of a nation's prosody. Thus in ancient Persian and some of the oldest Latin poetry the norm was (I believe) the number of syllables, and the same is perhaps true of modern French. In classic Greek and Latin verse the basic element was quantity. In Anglo-Saxon verse, quality, in the special form of alliteration, was an essential feature. In modern Germanic verse the fundamental rhythm-stuff is undoubtedly stress.

The rhythm of prose is not as yet very well understood, but it seems, in English at any rate, to be a different thing from metre. Instead of the short, pulsating rhythm characteristic of verse, we find in prose a long, sweeping, swaying, cumulative movement like that of ocean waves. A prose sentence seems to be made up of rushes of sound, rising and falling, hastening and delaying, swelling and dying away, in a complex and evasive sequence.

If the basic element of modern English verse is stress, that of modern English prose is probably pitch. That is to say, prose is in the main a succession of pitch-glides. The unit, or foot, is composed of a rising followed by a falling glide. These units are susceptible of considerable variation, and when artfully combined give the impression of a distinct tune or pattern.

In order to distinguish these types of rhythm I have applied to the rhythm of verse the term *nutation*, to the rhythm of prose the term *motation*.

Employing these convenient terms, we may say that Whitman, in his prosody, turned from the nutative to the motative principle, from the rhythm of beats to the rhythm of pitch-glides. Why he did so I have already indicated in part. It was because the rhythm of prose, being larger and freer than the rhythm of verse, seemed nearer to the uncramped spirit of nature from which he drew his inspiration. But another reason may be found in a peculiarity of Whitman's genius to which, I believe, sufficient attention has not hitherto been given. I mean his quick and delicate susceptibility to certain modes of motion and se-

quences of sound. One cannot read far in Whitman, either in his poetry or his prose, without being struck by this characteristic.

The trait is particularly noticeable in the book of notes and reflections called "Specimen Days," which reveals better than his poems, his fashion of observing nature and his predilections. From passages in this book it is obvious that Whitman took keen delight in natural free motions of every kind, especially swaying, or, as he would say, "urging" motions. I will give a few examples out of many that I have noted. "It did me good," he says of a band concert, "even to watch the violinists drawing their bows so masterly—every motion a study." On the steamer sailing out of New York harbor he notes with satisfaction the "long, pulsating swash, as our boat steams seaward." Crossing the Delaware on a winter night, he writes:

"I don't know anything more filling than to be on the wide, firm deck of a powerful boat, a clear, cool, extra-moonlight night, crushing proudly and resistlessly through this thick, marbly, glistening ice. The whole river is now spread with it—some immense cakes. There is such weirdness about the scene—partly the quality of the light, with its tinge of blue, the lunar twilight—only the large stars holding their own in the radiance of the moon. Temperature sharp, comfortable for motion, dry, full of oxygen. But the sense of power—the steady, scornful, imperious urge of our strong new engine, as she ploughs her way through the big and little cakes."

The ferry boats moving from shore to shore, and the yachts, "those daring, careening things of grace and wonder," "with their fierce, pure, hawk-like beauty and motion," the "perpetual travel of the horse-cars," the tide of humanity on Broadway, "bubbling and whirling and moving like its own environment of waters"—these things fascinate him. He is particularly stimulated by the rolling thunder of passing railway trains, of which he says, "I like both the sight and the sound." Riding on the railway exhilarated him like wine.

His notes of his journey through the west in 1879 are full of his delight in rapid motion. "What a fierce, weird pleasure," he

says, "to be in my berth at night in the luxurious palace-car, drawn by the mighty Baldwin—embodying and filling me, too, full of the swiftest motion and most resistless strength!"

In his observations of nature from day to day he rarely fails to mark the flight of birds. If he speaks of the polished surface of the pond, it is always because it mirrors some flying thing overhead. "Rare music" is his term for the sound of the mid-night flight of birds in their migrations. "You could *hear* the characteristic motion—once or twice 'the rush of mighty wings,' but oftener a velvety rustle, long drawn out." The flight of an eagle over the Hudson against the storm is "like reading some first-class natural tragedy or epic, or hearing martial trumpets. The splendid bird enjoys the hubbub—is adjusted and equal to it—finishes it so artistically. His pinions just oscillating—the position of his head and neck—his resistless, occasionally varied flight—now a swirl, now an upward movement—the black clouds driving—the angry wash below—the hiss of rain, the wind's piping (perhaps the ice colliding, grunting)—he tacking or jibing—now, as it were, for a change, abandoning himself to the gale, moving with it with such velocity—and now resuming control, he comes up against it, lord of the situation and the storm—lord, amid it, of power and savage joy."

He never tires of the graceful evolutions of the kingfishers. "For nearly an hour I indolently look and join them while they dart and turn and take their airy gambols, sometimes far up the creek disappearing for a few moments, and then surely returning again and performing most of their flight within sight of me, as if they knew I appreciated and absorb'd their vitality, spirituality, faithfulness and the rapid, vanishing, delicate lines of moving yet quiet electricity they draw for me across the spread of the grass, and the blue sky." Another day with equal delight he dwells upon the fluttering of myriads of light-yellow butterflies "dipping and oscillating" over a field of clover-hay. "In the lane as I came along just now I noticed one spot, ten feet square or so, where more than a hundred had collected, holding a revel, a gyration-dance, or butter-fly good-time, winding and

circling, down and across, but always keeping within the limits."

He had strange dream-trances in which fixed objects moved about, "sequacious of the lyre" of one of them he says: "I saw my favorite trees step out and promenade up, down, and around very curiously—with a whisper from one, leaning down as he passed me, *we do all this on the present occasion, exceptionally, just for you.*"

Akin to this almost morbid sensitiveness to motion, is Whitman's delight in certain sequences of sounds, particularly rushes of sounds, or sounds that swell and die away,—the "rolling music" of the distant railway trains, "the low rising and falling wind-purr from the tops of the maples and willows," "the musical low murmur through the pines, quite pronounced, curious, like waterfalls, now still'd, now pouring again," "the loud swelling, perpetual hum" of the bumble-bee, "varied now and then by something almost like a shriek." We may note particularly his absorption in the note of the locust,—“a long whirring, continued, quite loud noise graded in distinct swirls, or swinging circles, increasing in strength and rapidity up to a certain point, and then a fluttering, quietly tapering fall.” To this peculiar sound he calls special attention, "Let me say more about the song of the locust," he adds, a paragraph or two later, "even to repetition; a long, chromatic, tremulous crescendo, like a brass disk whirling round and round, emitting wave after wave of notes, beginning with a certain moderate beat or measure, rapidly increasing in speed and emphasis, reaching a point of great energy and significance, and then quickly and gracefully dropping down and out. Not the melody of the singing bird—far from it; the common musician might think without melody, but surely having to the finer ear a harmony of its own; monotonous—but what a swing there is in that brassy drone, round and round, cymbaline—or like the whirling of brass quoits."

None of the foregoing motions or sounds, however, ploughed so deeply into Whitman's feeling and imagination as the movement and sound of the sea,—the surge of the waves in mid-ocean, the ebb and flow of the tides, the pounding of the surf on the

shore. In one highly significant passage he tells how the conception of the sea became in a sense the regulative element of his composition:

SEA-SHORE FANCIES.

Even as a boy, I had the fancy, the wish, to write a piece, perhaps a poem, about the sea-shore—that suggesting, dividing line, contact, junction, the solid marrying the liquid—that curious, lurking something, (as doubtless every objective form finally becomes to the subjective spirit,) which means far more than its mere first sight, grand as that is—blending the real and ideal, and each made portion of the other. Hours, days, in my Long Island youth and early manhood, I haunted the shores of Rockaway or Coney Island, or away east to the Hamptons or Montauk. Once, at the latter place, (by the old lighthouse, nothing but sea-tossings in sight in every direction as far as the eye could reach,) I remember well, I felt that I must one day write a book expressing this liquid, mystic theme. Afterward, I recollect, how it came to me that instead of any special lyrical or epical or literary attempt, the sea-shore should be an invisible influence, a pervading gauge and tally for me, in my composition. (Let me give a hint here to young writers. I am not sure but I have unwittingly follow'd out the same rule with other powers besides sea and shores—avoiding them, in the way of any dead set at poetizing them, as too big for formal handling—quite satisfied if I could indirectly show that we have met and fused, even if only once, but enough—that we have really absorbed each other and understand each other.)

There is a dream, a picture, that for years at intervals, (sometimes quite long ones, but surely again, in time,) has come noiselessly up before me, and I really believe, fiction as it is, has enter'd largely into my practical life—certainly into my writings, and shaped and colored them. It is nothing more or less than a stretch of interminable white-brown sand, hard and smooth and broad, with the ocean perpetually, grandly, rolling in upon it, with slow-measured sweep, with rustle and hiss and foam, and many a thump as of low bass drums. This scene, this picture, I say, has arisen before me at times for years. Sometimes I wake at night and can hear and see it plainly.

To be compared with this poetic credo, is the assertion in one of his latest poems that he would gladly exchange the met-

rical art of Homer, Shakespeare, and Tennyson for the rhythms of the ocean waves :

"These, these, O sea, all these I'd gladly barter

Would you the undulations of one wave its trick to me transfer."

Whitman's reasons for rejecting the stress-and-quantity principle which has generally satisfied the ears of other English poets, should now be clear. His delight in large free movements and rushes of sound made him impatient of the short units, the quickly recurring beats, of the nutative rhythm. He wished to embody in his verse the largo of nature, especially the flux and reflux of the waves, the rise and fall of the murmur of the pines, the circling dip of bird-flight, the crescendo and dying fall of the locust-song.

Other poets had done this, to be sure, but mainly by way of making the sound an imitation of the sense. But mere imitation was not enough for Whitman. He did not wish to make a "dead set at poetizing" these sounds and movements; he sought to make them the very foundation of his prosody, the regulative principle of his rhythm.

Moved by this desire he turned from verse to prose. In the pitch-glides and speech-tunes which are the basis of the prosaic pattern, in the swift upward rush and retarded cadence of the prose sentence, he found the principle he sought. He adopted it. But, having adopted it, he found it in its ordinary form inapt to his purpose. Prose, as prose, is the instrument of communication. It suggests and implies the communicative attitude, whereas Whitman's genius, like that of every great poet, was mainly expressive. In the tide of poetic creation, therefore, he instinctively and perforce returned to nutative pattern. But he brought back with him from his incursion into prose new materials for the weaving. With these materials he created for himself a new and peculiar kind of verse, in which the dips and glides and evolutions of the prose rhythm were woven into a pattern of nutation. In this seemingly hybrid form he found a medium adequate to the expression of his peculiar genius.

When I read Whitman's poetry in the light of this concep-

tion, a fantastic myth passes through my mind. I seem to see in Whitman some giant-limbed old heathen god who has descended to the earth fain to take part in the dance of mortals. He begins by practicing the waltz, but soon tires of the mincing steps and quick gyrations. He wants a larger, freer movement. He then tries marching and running and leaping, only to find that what his soul hungers for is the undulating movement of the waltz. So, devising a kind of colossal minuet, with woven paces and with waving arms, he moves through it with a grandiose, galumphing majesty peculiar to himself, flinging his great limbs all abroad and shedding ambrosia from his flying locks, yet with all his abandon keeping time to the music, and in all the seeming waywardness of his saltations preserving the law and pattern of the dance.

I have implied that the form of his verse was original with Whitman, but this is not strictly true, for something akin to it is found in the prose translation of the Hebrew prophets and psalmists, in the Ossianic poems, in Blake's "Prophetic Visions," and even in the insipid poetry of Martin Farquhar Tupper. But the resemblance is only a family resemblance. One needs to make but few comparisons to see that Whitman has devised a new thing.

To exhibit in detail the methods and devices by which the poet has so handled the elements of prose as to produce some of the effects of verse, would not only be tedious but would extend my paper beyond reasonable bounds. Not wholly to disappoint curiosity, however, I will indicate a few of the most striking features.

To illustrate the difference between Whitman's verse and the ordinary accentual metres, let us compare a passage from Shakespeare with a passage from Whitman. We may take for this purpose some lines of Juliet's apostrophe to night in the third act of "Romeo and Juliet," and the address to night in Whitman's "Song of Myself." In parts of each of these selections the rhythm of the lines is curiously similar:

"Come night; come, Romeo; come, thou day in night;
For thou wilt lie upon the wings of night
Whiter than new snow on a raven's back.
Come, gentle night, come loving black-brow'd night,
Give me my Romeo; and, when he shall die,
Take him and cut him out in little stars
And he will make the face of heaven so fine
That all the world will be in love with night."

Now turn to Whitman:

I am he that walks with the tender and growing night;
I call to the earth and sea, half-held by the night.
Press close, bare-bosom'd night! press close, magnetic, nourish-
ing night!
Night of south winds—night of the day's few stars!
Still, nodding night! mad, naked summer night.
Smile, O voluptuous, cool-breath'd earth!
Earth of the slumbering and liquid trees!
Earth of departed sunset! earth of the mountains misty-topt!
Earth of the vitreous pour of the full moon, just tinged with
blue!
Earth of shine and dark, mottling the tide of the river!
Earth of the limpid gray of clouds, brighter and clearer for
my sake!
Far-swooping elbow'd earth! rich, apple-blossom'd earth!
Smile, for your lover comes!

Underlying the Shakespearean verse is the regular pulse of the iambic pentameter—tee-dee'/tee-dee'/tee-dee'/tee-dee'/tee-dee'/—like the beat of horses' hoofs. We are not allowed to forget it. The quick recurrence of the stress can be felt even in the most impetuous phrases, such as "Come, gentle night, come, loving, black-brow'd night;" for the nutative tune has been impressed upon us by such regular lines in the preceding parts as "Four thou wilt lie upon the wings of night," and comes out again immediately in the following, "And he will make the face of heaven so fine."

Not so in Whitman's lines. The rapid beat of the metrical foot is absent. In its place we detect rushes or glides of sound, accelerations and delays of speed, long swellings and diminutions of energy, these units of the verse being combined in an

intricate and ever varied pattern by the recurrence of similar phrases and by subtle correspondences of one part of the stanza with another.

In general, it may be said that the Whitmanian line, scanned in routine fashion, consists, like the prose sentence, of an advancing and retreating wave. This simple movement is varied almost infinitely (1) by varying the length of the successive waves proportionally, (2) by allowing the speech-rhythm now to coincide with the routine scansion, now to conflict with it, (3) by introducing minor waves or impulses in varying numbers and proportionate lengths, (4) by the artful use of alliteration and refrain.¹

A careful reading of Whitman convinces me that he is fairly scrupulous and regular in the observance of his own prosodic rules. Doubtless he is lax at times—but so were Shakespeare and Byron, and dull and prosy at other times—but so were Chaucer and Wordsworth. Taking him all in all, it may be doubted whether many poets who have produced as great a bulk of writing as Whitman has, have lived up to their lights more consistently. Indeed it is not too much to say that of all American poets Whitman is the only one whose sense of artistry is comparable with that of the greatest British poets.

In conclusion, the question may be raised whether the Whitmanian prosody is effective. Will it endure? Whitman has himself given the final test of poetry:

BY BLUE ONTARIO'S SHORE.

Rhymes and rhymers pass away, poems distilled from poems
pass away,
The swarms of reflectors and the polite pass, and leave ashes,
Admirers, importers, obedient persons, make but the soil of literature,
America justifies itself, give it time, no disguise can deceive it
or conceal from it, it is impassive enough,
Only toward the likes of itself will it advance to meet them,

¹The structure of Whitman's verse with reference both to the line and to the stanza, has been analyzed in detail by P. Jannaccone, in his "La Poesia di Walt Whitman e l'evoluzione delle forme ritmiche" (Torino: 1898).

If its poets appear it will in due time advance to meet them,
there is no fear of mistake,
(The proof of a poet shall be sternly deferr'd till his country
absorbs him as affectionately as he has absorb'd it.)

If America should ever absorb Whitman as Whitman absorbed America, no doubt his mode of versifying would pass into the consciousness of the race and seem as much a matter of course as iambic pentameter. But that stern proof cannot now be adduced. Meanwhile I can only give my own testimony to its effect upon me personally.

I find that if I turn to some favorite passage of Whitman and read it over three times, it passes through as many transformations. At the first reading it is fine and moving poetry, well articulated, beautifully rhythmized, altogether satisfying. But upon a second reading it seems to degenerate slightly and parts of it sound commonplace. Separate phrases are still good, but the tension of the structure has relaxed. A third reading takes a good deal of the life and spirit out of it as far as these qualities depend on the close knitting-together of the phrases. I must put the poem aside for a time in order to renew the first fine careless rapture.

This is not true of the fine passages of Shakespeare, Wordsworth, or Keats, or of passages of great prose. These I can repeat to myself not only without loss but with some gain. They grow firmer and better articulated with each reading.

Why this difference should be I am unable to say. Perhaps it is because in reading Whitman the ear hungers for the familiar beat of the nutative rhythm, and after the stimulus of a first contact is over, finds it something of a strain to keep pace with the poet's *largo*.

At any rate, this personal experience shakes my faith somewhat in the immediate and general acceptance of the new poetic form. I cannot believe it likely that the prosody of Whitman will soon drive from the field the prosody of Chaucer, Shakespeare and Wordsworth.

University of Michigan.

FRED NEWTON SCOTT.